



Book Reviews

Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men

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Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. *Michael Kimmel.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

You know you have encountered good sociology when someone explains things that you have often observed, but have never imagined in ways that reveal the social structure of your observations. We have been able to count on such sociological insights before from Michael Kimmel, and he has done it again in his new, thought-provoking book, *Guyland*. Kimmel has long provided some of the most thoughtful analyses of men and gender, and his new book is no exception. Written for the lay public, but intriguing for scholars as well, *Guyland* explores the everyday world of young men whom Kimmel describes as immersed in a new stage of social development, one transformed by social-historical changes that have made the world of young men less certain than it may have been in the past.

Kimmel defines "Guyland" as a "stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood" (p. 4). There are no fixed age boundaries to this life phase, though it spans roughly from the time young men are in their mid-teens (about age 16) to their mid-20s. Guyland is, in Kimmel's words, a time of "suspended animation between boyhood and manhood" (p. 6). It is a social space marked by norms and values that allow men to feel like men even at a time when the broader social context makes young men feel insecure, uncertain of their future, and without the historic roadmaps with which to chart their adult identities. Guyland is the world of young men's fascination with shock jocks, sports and locker room talk, endless video games, bar hopping, and hanging with their "brothers." Without the old social scripts that dictated the path to responsible adulthood, young men now drift into adulthood, passing through Guyland—or sometimes staying in it—along the way. Kimmel portrays Guyland as a "volatile stage, when one has access to all the tools of adulthood with few of the moral and familiar constraints that urge sober conformity" (p. 43). In this context, men struggle to "live up to a definition of masculinity they feel they had no part in creating, and yet from which they feel powerless to escape" (p. 43).

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Kimmel argues that Guyland has emerged in a context where the social definition of manhood has been transformed by social and historical shifts that include, but are not limited to, the entry of women into public spaces that were once exclusively for men; demographic shifts that have delayed the age of first marriage; increased consumption and cultural homogeneity; and economic restructuring that has changed the security of work. As a consequence, the former markers of adult masculinity (at least for white, middle-class men)—stable marriage and secure work—no longer anchor men's identities as they leave their families of origin. In this vacuum, Guyland emerges as a homosocial space wherein men are suspended between the dependency of youth and the full responsibilities of a masculine adulthood.

Guyland is complex and is manifested differently based on the social context and actors involved, but one of its most prominent features is the assertion of heteronormativity through such things as the public display of pornography, bragging about "hooking up," and engaging in homophobia banter. Indeed, Guyland is founded on homosocial relations that buttress the social definition of masculinity. It is a social world that completely revolves around men, even when "girls" are around.

Within Guyland, Kimmel argues, "guys" love "girls," but actually hate women, making it a highly misogynistic social environment. Women can be present in Guyland but, if they are, they must be "one of the guys." Women have little power to influence this social environment—one that is, in fact, quite risky for them, even if they are unaware of it. Kimmel argues that the culture of Guyland supports and rationalizes sexual assault, thus explaining the high degree of sexual assault, victimization, and degradation that occurs on most college campuses. While Kimmel points out that not all guys are violent perpetrators or homophobic or sexist, he argues that what makes Guyland so dangerous is the inability of bystanders, a much larger percentage of young men, to break their silence against the harmful actions of the few.

Kimmel analyzes the cultural dynamics of Guyland as containing three components: a culture of entitlement, a culture of privilege, and a culture of protection. The culture of entitlement is Kimmel's way of capturing the implicit feelings of superiority that white men often hold, especially as white male privilege is being eroded by the presence of women and people of color in formerly all-male worlds. Within this phenomenon and the culture of privilege, white men then resent those they see as "taking their jobs." Kimmel argues that men are consequently afraid of being "outcast, marginalized, or shunned" (p. 51) and their fears produce a culture of silently protecting other men—even when they are doing things that are harmful—thus, the culture of protection.

At the heart of Guyland's customs are men's feelings of being lost, but needing to prove themselves to their peers. Men's place in the world is also reinforced through homophobic talk. As also studied by C. J. Pascoe in her ethnographic study of the social construction of manhood in high school (Pascoe, 2007), young men routinely call others "faggots" or "gays"—comments that are typically not aimed at men who actually are gay, but at those

who do not conform to dominant norms of masculinity. In Guyland, then, homophobia reinforces hegemonic, heterosexist masculinity.

This brief summary necessarily oversimplifies Kimmel's argument. Those who want a more rigorous examination of the social structures of Guyland will probably be frustrated by the loose methodology and sweeping assertions of the book. Kimmel references nearly 400 interviews as the basis for his project, but they were done as very fluid conversations, in various parts of the country, and without a specific research design. As he describes it, the book draws on "thirty years of experience in education, thirty years of talking with tens of thousands of college and high-school men" (p. 21). Included are young men in the present generation, men who have aged out of that demographic group, and some women who exist on the periphery of Guyland. There is no rigorous scientific sample, only references to seemingly more casual conversations with men. Yet, despite these limitations, having such a large body of information provides a strong foundation for Kimmel's engaging argument. *Guyland's* journalistic style is, not surprisingly, both its strength and weakness. It has been widely reviewed in the popular press, thus bringing a sociological eye on men and gender to the public. The book's lasting value will be the many opportunities it provides for other analysts to explore the book's many insights. But there is a tendency for Kimmel to overgeneralize, despite his caution that not all men fit the profile of guys in Guyland.

A major criticism of the book is that it is mostly centered on the experiences of certain groups of men—a point Kimmel notes, but does not fully embrace throughout the book. He acknowledges that the world of Guyland is mostly that of white college-bound or college-educated middle-class men, but he often makes it seem that Guyland is normative for working-class and black men, too. Kimmel's assertion that the norms of Guyland apply to other groups is not very convincing. There may be features of Guyland that cross race and class, but the book needs a more nuanced analysis of this idea. Otherwise, white middle-class educated men's experiences become the universal norm by which all men's experiences are considered. Still, *Guyland* evokes many new questions about young men and the often unrecognized societal pressures that affect them.

Guyland's accessibility makes it especially appropriate for undergraduate courses, although it is rich with ideas that can be further explored by graduate student and faculty research. It could be effectively used in courses on gender, the sociology of youth, the lifecourse, the sociology of the family, and in introductory sociology where instructors want to capture students' attention by viewing phenomena in their own familiar environment. But it should also be required reading for university administrators, such as deans of student affairs who wrestle with problems on campus of binge drinking, sexual violence, hazing, and other risky behaviors that Kimmel explains as consequences of the social norms in Guyland. Campuses rarely frame their approach to these problems within the gender analysis that Kimmel provides, so the book can provide new ways of addressing these pervasive social issues.

Michael Kimmel makes us think about what it means for men to maneuver through a world where white masculinity is perceived as under threat and where adult norms of masculinity have broken down. He asks us to think about what it means for men to still hold social power, even when they also feel somewhat powerless in the context of sweeping social changes. This extremely well-written and provocative book will shape how we think about the worlds of young men for many years.

REFERENCE

Pascoe, C. J. 2007. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Mail Order Husbands

Laura V. Heston³

Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance. Ericka Johnson. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Ericka Johnson has published the first manuscript-length piece about “mail-order marriage” since Nicole Constable’s groundbreaking work *Romance on a Global Stage* (University of California Press, 2003). As a researcher in this field, I was incredibly excited to read this book. Constable set a high bar with her piece, but I feel there is still a great deal of innovation to be made in the study of commercial marriage migration, cross-border marriage, “mail-order bride” research, the political economy of desire, and all the other areas associated with this emerging subfield. In many ways, Johnson has done for Russian-American Internet romance what Constable did for Filipina-American and Chinese-American marriage by taking an in-depth look at this phenomenon from the women’s perspective in a detailed, thoughtful, and scholarly way. She brings together the best insights in the field, and for this she should be credited, but as far as innovation goes, this book still left me desiring more.

On the first page, Johnson begins with a familiar recitation of “mail order bride” stereotypes: women are allegedly duped into “selling themselves” to an

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